Introduction: Voices

YOU CANNOT TASTE a work of prose. It has no color and it makes no sound. Its shape is without significance. When people talk about writing, though, they often use adjectives borrowed from activities whose products make a more direct appeal to the senses — painting, sculpture, music, cuisine. People say, "The writing is colorful," or "pungent," or "shapeless," or "lyrical," and no one asks them where, exactly, they perceive those qualities. Discussions of "tone" and "texture" are carried on in the complete ontological absence of such things. (You could say that so are discussions of "meaning," but that's another philosophical problem.) Writing is a verbal artifact that, as it is being decoded, stimulates sensations that are unique to writing but that, for some reason, often have to be described in terms of nonverbal experiences.

One of the most mysterious of writing's immaterial properties is what people call its "voice." Editors sometimes refer to it, in a phrase that underscores the paradox at the heart of the idea, as the "voice on the page." Many editors think that a voice is what makes great writing great. Most writers do, too. Prose can show many virtues, including originality, without having a voice. It may be packed solid with intellectual nutrients; upon its import, much may seem to depend. It may avoid cliché, radiate conviction, be grammatically so clean that your grandmother could eat off it. But none of this has anything to do with this elusive entity, a "voice." There are probably all kinds of literary sins that prevent a piece of writing from having a voice, but there seems to be no guaranteed technique for creating one.

"Voice" is sometimes associated with "style," but they are not always the same. Writing can be stylish and still be voiceless, and this is as true of the plain, "just the facts" style as it is of the style of high figuration. Ingenuity, wit, sarcasm, euphony, frequent outbreaks of the first-person singular — any of these can enliven prose without giving it a voice. Of all the intangibles of good writing, voice is probably the most transcendental. You can set the stage as elaborately as you like, but either the phantom appears or it doesn't.

When it does make an appearance, the subject matter is often irrelevant. "I do not care for movies very much and I rarely see them," W. H. Auden wrote to the editors of *The Nation* in 1944; "further, I am suspicious of criticism as the literary genre which, more than any other, recruits epigones, pedants without insight, intellectuals without love. I am all the more surprised, therefore, to find myself not only reading Mr. Agee before I read anyone else in *The Nation* but also consciously looking forward all week to reading him again." A lot of the movies James Agee reviewed between 1942 and 1948, when he was *The Nation*'s film critic, were negligible then and are forgotten now. Auden was not merely being a curmudgeon. But you can still read those columns with pleasure. They continue to pass the ultimate test of good writing: it is more painful to stop reading them than it is to keep going. When you get to the end of Agee's sentences, you wish, like Auden, that there were more sentences.

Writing that has a voice is writing that has something like a personality. But whose personality is it? As with most things in art, there is no straight road from the product back to the person who made it. There are writers read and loved for their humor who are not especially funny people, and writers read and loved for their eloquence who, in conversation, swallow their words or can't seem to finish a sentence. Wisdom on the page correlates with wisdom in the writer about as frequently as a high batting average correlates with a high IQ: they just seem to have very little to do with one another. Charming people can produce prose of sneering sententiousness, and cranky neurotics can, to their readers, seem to be inexhaustibly delightful. Personal drabness, through some obscure neural kink, can deliver verbal blooms. Readers who meet writers whose voice they have fallen in love with usually need to make a small adjustment in order to hang on to their infatuation.

Some confusion about what it means for writing to have a voice arises from the metaphor itself. Many readers, and many writers, for that matter, think that effectiveness in writing has something to do with how close it is to speech. Writers often claim that they never write something that they would not say. It is hard to know how this could be literally true. Speech is somatic, a bodily function, and it is accompanied by physical inflections (tone of voice, winks, smiles, raised eyebrows, hand gestures) that are not reproducible in writing. Spoken language is repetitive, fragmentary, contradictory, ambiguous, loaded down with space holders (*like, um, you know what I'm saying*) — pretty much all the things writing teachers tell students not to do. But speakers are generally understood right away. You don't have to hear a sentence three times before you get it. On the other hand, you often have to read a sentence three times, occasionally even a well-written one. As a medium, writing is a million times weaker than speech. It's a hieroglyph competing with a symphony.

The other reason that speech is a bad metaphor for writing is that writing, for 99 percent of people who do it, is the opposite of spontaneous. Some writers write many drafts of a piece, and some write one draft, at the pace of a snail. But chattiness, slanginess, in-your-face-ness, and any other feature of writing that is conventionally characterized as "like speech" are all usually the results of intense experimentation, revision, calibrating, walks around the block, unnecessary phone calls, and recalibrating. Writers are people in whom *l'esprit de l'escalier* is a recurrent experience: they are always thinking of the perfect riposte when the moment for saying it has already passed. So they wait a few years and put it in print. Writers are not mere copyists of language; they are polishers, embellishers, perfecters. They are people who spend hours getting the timing exactly right — so that it sounds absolutely unrehearsed.

There's a wonderful story about the gap between speech and writing. It features the British critic Desmond McCarthy. McCarthy was a member of the Bloomsbury group, and, apparently, a legendary talker. His friends thought that his writing, which he produced reluctantly, gave a poor idea of his conversational gifts. So they hired a stenographer and invited McCarthy over. They hid the stenographer outside the door and had McCarthy hold forth. McCarthy obliged his friends by discoursing brilliantly for an hour or so, and then left. The friends waited impatiently for the transcription of his conversation to arrive. It did. They read it. The writing was completely banal.

Still, the claim that the written "voice" is an artificial construction of language, deliberate and self-conscious or impersonal and accidental but never spontaneous and natural, is not a claim most writers could accept. Writing is personal; it *feels* personal. The unfunny person who is a humorous writer does not think, of her work, "That's not me." Critics speak of a literary persona, which is a device for compelling a divorce between the author and the text. But no one, or almost no one, writes "as a persona." People write as people, and if there were nothing personal about the outcome, few would bother with it. Composition is a labor-intensive business. And what makes it especially so is that the rate of production is beyond the writer's control. The words don't just appear on a conveyor belt, and you package them up. You have to wait, and what you are waiting for is something inside you to come up with the words. That something, for writers, is the voice.

The real basis for the metaphor of voice in writing is not speaking. It is singing. You cannot know a singer from her speech, and although "natural phrasing" and "from the heart" are prized attributes of song, actually singing that way requires rehearsal, preparation, and getting in touch with whatever it is inside singers that, by a neural kink or the grace of God, enables them to turn themselves into vessels of musical sound. Right before he walked onstage at the opera house, Luciano Pavarotti is reported to have taken a big bite of an apple. That's how he helped his voice to sound fresh, spontaneous, and natural.

What writers hear, when they are trying to write, is something more like singing than like speaking. Inside your head, you're yakking away to yourself all the time. Getting *that* down on paper is a depressing, Desmond McCarthy–like experience. What you are trying to do when you write is to transpose the yakking into verbal music; and the voice inside, when you find it, which can take hours or days or weeks, is not your speaking voice. It is your singing voice — except that it comes out as writing. Writers labor under two anxieties. The first is that the voice that they found a hundred times in the past has gone forever, that they will never listen to it again. The

other is that, having finally found it this time, they will lose it again before the piece is finished. Then, they know that, having sung its song, it will disappear again. This is the voice people are surprised not to encounter when they "meet the writer." The writer is not so surprised. One day, he or she will be back in front of the paper or the keyboard and have to find the voice all over again. Some writers, when they begin a new piece, spend hours frantically rereading their old stuff, trying to remember how they did it. Rereading rarely works, because nothing works reliably. Sooner or later, normally later than everyone involved would like, the voice shows up, takes a bite out of the apple, and walks onstage.

Most of the essays in this volume were picked by ear. I was searching for voices. Some are cool and some are anti-cool. I like both. There are many subjects here — for the subject, to a point, doesn't matter. Still, as a reader, my favorite kind of essay is the one that makes a lost time present — the essay that tells me how it was in New York City in the 1970s, or on a Manhattan bus in the 1940s, or at a midwestern high school, or during a summer on Cape Cod. Selfishly — and why shouldn't an editor be selfish? — I like to read stories about my own times. I never get tired of it. I feel as though I could do it forever, and I probably will.

Writing is a window. It opens onto vanished feelings and vanished worlds. Often it is the only window there is, the only access we will ever have to those things. It is more than a mere record, like a photograph, because it is also a sensibility, a point of view, a voice. It is the place where, fifty or a hundred years from now, people will go to see — or to hear — what it was like to be alive when we were alive. We were alive in 2003, and these pieces are part of what remains.

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